

## CANBERRA SCHOOL OF ART

### ART EXHIBITION

Non-Aboriginal Australian artists have a problem. If they are to make a serious contribution to Australian art and indeed ensure national art, how are they going to develop a unique identity as Australian artists? For the Aboriginal artist there is no problem. Aboriginals have an ancient cultural tradition which can provide an artistic framework and form a basis and context for their work. It is not all.

### POST-GRADUATE DIPLOMA REPORT

(PAINTING)

As a student under whose name you are not only shaped by your cultural origins outside of Australia but you are also shaped by the history and heritage of this continent - whether you recognise this fact or not.

by

I take the view that a continuing non-Aboriginal artist must have an awareness of their own cultural identity at all times.

MARJI HILL

traditions. But when we speak of what they are today - at least at the level of their identity - we are not.

The search for an indigenous artistic identity provides the focus and rationale of my art.

February 1986

The last 100 years of Australian history are certainly the source for the intellectual and artistic content of my work. Since 1788 incidents in Australian history have involved both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. These incidents are conflict-based, sometimes involving black-white conflict and sometimes involving conflict among the non-Aboriginal components of Australia's population. The story of the last 100 years is one of violence, movement, migration

## ART STATEMENT

Non-Aboriginal Australian artists have a problem. If they are to make a serious contribution to Australian art and indeed international art, how are they going to develop a unique identity as Australian artists? For the Aboriginal artist there is no problem; Aborigines have an ancient cultural tradition which can provide an artistic framework and form a basis and context for their work. It is not sufficient for non-Aboriginal artists to link into the cultural traditions of their European, British or Asian heritages. To be an Australian today means you are not only shaped by your cultural origins outside of Australia but you are also shaped by the history and heritage of this continent - whether you recognise this fact or not

I take the view that a practising non-Aboriginal artist must have an awareness of the two, or even multiplicity of cultural traditions, that make them into being what they are today - at least at the level of their identity (who they are).

The search for an Australian artistic identity provides the focus and rationale of my art.

The past 200 years of Australian history is currently the source for the intellectual and artistic content of my work. Since 1788 incidents in Australian history have involved both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. These incidents are conflict-based, sometimes involving black-white conflict and sometimes involving conflict simply among the non-Aboriginal components of Australia's population. The story of the last 200 years is one of violence, massacre, attempted



genocide, rebellion, oppression and dispossession.

Conflict has always been a central theme in my art. An analysis of these historical incidents in art now allows me to expand my historical viewpoint and to concentrate on the scarred landscape that reflects the human struggle over land and oppression.

Specifically, my paintings throughout the post-graduate year stem from the circumstances and events surrounding six Australian battlefields. These include the Battle of Parramatta 1792-1802 (Pemulwuy's resistance), the Battle of Vinegar Hill 1804 (convict uprising), the Battle of Bathurst 1824, the Battle of Pinjarra in W.A. 1834, the Battle of the Eureka Stockade 1854, and the Battle of the Kalkadoons in North Queensland in 1884.

The "battle" theme allows me to explore some of the issues vital to my ideological position. My intent has been not to illustrate nor to make narrative paintings but rather, to explore the images that capture the essence of these historic battlefields and to find a form and style best suited to forcefully conveying my ideas.

Images that I've explored over the year have included the human figure massacred on a battle site, Aboriginal resistance fighters (again the human figure), horses used in punitive expeditions, flags (Eureka), and the land itself usually with the slaughtered figure or fighting warrior/soldier meshed or fused into the landscape.

In the recent works the image is lost or almost lost in the "land". The treatment of the land is handled in the nature of the paint application itself - a lot of fast, agitated marks over the entirety of the canvas. The image, whether it be the massacred human figure or the heroic warrior, is embedded in a "landscape" of marks, symbolic of the

nature of the Australian countryside itself.

#### MAJOR INFLUENCES

The subject matter of my art arises out of a 15 year involvement with many aspects of Aboriginal affairs, as student, researcher, lecturer and writer. It has provided me with the inspirational source for a lot of my art. It has also influenced and moulded my philosophical position on what it means to be an Australian. Aboriginal affairs, anthropology, social and political issues have always flowed into my art (even long before art school days) and these interest areas have developed in me a concern for communicating something relevant about life to an audience through the medium of painting. My treatment of this subject matter is essentially expressionist, and it is the expressionist traditions of Australia, Europe and America that have directly had an impact on my approach to painting providing the artistic framework in which I operate.

Early in life I was regularly exposed to Australian painters such as Arthur Boyd, Nolan, Drysdale, Dobell and Leonard French. Perhaps it was partly this early exposure that led to a long-term interest in the work of the Antipodeans - principally Arthur Boyd, Nolan (of the Ned Kelly era), Percival, Tucker, Vassilieff and Molvig. Contemporary Australian artists also exhibiting this expressionist tradition and whose work I have been drawn to include Mike Parr, Imants Tillier and Ken Unsworth.

On the European scene Van Gogh, Soutine, Munch and Chagall are in the forefront of significant influences. Then there are the Fauves and the early German Expressionists. In 1984 I saw a lot of these works

both in New York and in European galleries. Derain, Vlaminck, Vuillard, van Dongen and Matisse impress for their freedom from restraints - the rules and conventions - and their free use of vibrant colour. Their works are intense, vital and joyous - even indulgent. For many of these same reasons I enjoy the German expressionists, except that with the latter lie an appreciation of their portrayal of the darker side of life, the lurking passions and the emotional intensity of these works. This interest in expressionism flows over into the work of some of the German expressionists operating in the 1960s. Artists at this time who took up independent and highly individual positions and attitudes included Baselitz, Bernd Koberling, A.R. Penck, Heimrat Prem, Helmut Sturm and H.P. Zimmer. And outside of Germany the works of Asgar Jorn and Karel Appel likewise have major appeal.

In identifying the strong European influences I should not forget Miro, Klee, Kandinsky and Max Ernst. Their works have become household imagery for me. For years, either in book form, on poster or mural, I have lived with their art.

Jackson Pollock and de Kooning are recent influences. I've come to appreciate their intensely physical approach to painting, in which the act of painting becomes a critical element in picture making. I like Pollock's vehement paint application structured by rhythmically patterned linear elements in which the image becomes lost in the intensity of the paint. With de Kooning, Rose<sup>1</sup> (1980:77) has a most apt description - "His whiplash-like line, now thick, now thin, now blotted, now erased altogether, weaves in and out, appearing and disappearing with mischievous agility. Spatial ambiguity as well as ambiguity of content is heightened to its utmost." Two other American

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1. Rose, Barbara, 1980, *American painting: the twentieth century*, London: Macmillan

painters, some of whose work I admire are Jim Dine and Jasper Johns. Dine's "Cardinal, 1976" and John's American flag and target paintings appeal because of their use of the dominant central image and their inherent symbolic power.

Probably my affinity for the basic expressionist tradition stems from my desire to paint emotionally charged paintings often with screaming intensity. Through such paintings I hope to move the viewer into having some strong response which may be either positive or negative - but whatever the outcome, to communicate the original intent of a series of works.

Last but not least, Aboriginal art in all its forms and styles undoubtedly has assisted the nurturing of my intellectual and conceptual development as an artist. Its variety of styles, often originating from different conceptual bases, has helped me develop a personal perspective on what LAND means in the Australian context. While I do not consciously borrow or imitate Aboriginal art I am not adverse to allowing its influences to creep into my paintings. After all, in trying to develop an Australian identity in art I see that somehow, somehow, there must be a fusion between the European and Aboriginal traditions.

#### PERSONAL APPROACH TO PAINTING

A strong interest in subject matter has for long been integral to my work. Sometimes this has taken the form of the overt image - and, has been the overriding and dominant element in the paintings; at other times, the paintings have swung to the other extreme where the image has become lost in abstraction (à la Jackson Pollock) and physical joy of playing around with paint.

My works of 1985 reflect this swing of the pendulum. But the content has always remained there; I've always wanted the socio-political message to be communicated. Even when the image is almost lost the intent remains. My central problem is how to arrive at a balance between the overt image and its subjugation in abstraction.

I see the problem as having to do with a rational mode of operating versus a more irrational, subjective and intuitive approach to painting. In earlier years painting for me was a rational and intellectual activity. The paintings suffered as a result; they died. However, after a succession of "breakthroughs" many of my preconceived ideas were challenged. I've now come to the conclusion that I am an intuitive painter; I don't like to preconceive the end product; I like to find ways whereby I can tap the subconscious and let the painting flow from me, determining its own course, rather than having me determining the outcomes of the painting. While the intellectual side to my painting remains, I attempt to internalise to intellectualism and the content. My approach now is to forget about the subject matter (for it is there still). When I commence a painting, while I may start with a rough idea of the composition and basic image, I "switch off" from the subject. My next step, after roughing out the underpainting, is to work very fast and vigorously losing myself in the paint, and letting the act of painting become an enjoyment, a pleasure and even sensuous experience. In this process anything can happen. The painting may give rise to the unexpected, it may surprise; one has no idea of the outcome. Perhaps the end result will bear no relationship to the rough idea of the beginning. But this is of no concern to me. It is this unplanned, the tapping of the irrational and the subconscious, the surprises that provide the magic and excitement of painting.

## JOURNAL (An account of the year's progress)

4 March 1985

In the few weeks leading up to the commencement of the post-graduate year I had the strong conviction that the paintings I wanted to make should be solidly Australian based. No doubt, this view was a response to my three month art study trip to New York, London and Europe in 1984. To make paintings then with a distinctly Australian flavour - this was my resolve. Then the problem was how does one achieve this. So I set to thinking about the source material that might inspire the kind of works I wanted to do. Three thematic streams sprung to mind:

- (1) Landscape based ideas stemming from ideological beliefs about the land, its inhabitants, its 40,000 year history, its physical antiquity and its cultures.
- (2) To look into the last 200 years of Australian history so that one could examine the intercultural and inter-racial relationships and how this history has shaped the Australia of today.
- (3) To explore cross-cultural symbols, eg, the European imperial eagle and the eagle found in some Aboriginal imagery, etc.

7-20 March 1985

Over this time my decision was to make landscape-based paintings. This would then simply have been a follow-on to the works I made early in 1984 prior to my overseas trip. To successfully achieve this I needed to go bush to make a series of detailed, observational drawings on which the



7-20 March 1985 (Contd.)

paintings could be based. At the time, my plans were continually frustrated by the raging bushfires that were sweeping around Canberra. A couple of paintings were made on this theme based on drawings done prior to the commencement of the semester. They were unresolved, however, and the marks were too large for the medium sized canvases I was using. The scale needed to be much larger.

21 March 1985

Before the art school year had even begun I had been approached by Al Grassby about the possibility of doing a collaborative venture with him on a book to be called *Six Australian Battlefields*. Initially the idea was to paint some paintings that related to each of the six battles. On 20 March we had further discussions on the idea and concept for the book. As time went on my involvement in the project became that of researcher and organiser <sup>and co-author</sup> of the project. It was at this point in time that I made the decision to devote 1985 to making a large collection of paintings that would be inspired by the Australian battle themes. The decision seemed to be a logical one. My work had always involved conflict, Aborigines, the Australian environment - and even, prior to art school days - my work was politically and socially oriented. Thematically, at least, the idea seemed brilliant. It fitted in with my whole philosophical position of wanting to paint distinctively Australian paintings; it also fitted my ideological stance as to what it means to be an Australian.





"Guerrilla attack"

OIL ON CANVAS

That day I made an historically based painting - the source being an etching of Aborigines attacking a shepherd's hut. This was a 4'x5' work - its treatment very free, painterly and probably capturing the emotional turmoil of this moment of conflict. The image, however, was totally unimportant to the work. This did not worry me. I had reached that phase in my works where the image had become secondary to the physical act of painting in which the painterly and other formal

21 March 1985 (Contd.)

qualities dominated. (On my return from Europe I had made a series of very small acrylic works on paper using the same theme and again allowing the freedom and wildness of the paint to take over). While the painting was based on a definite subject matter its treatment was totally abstract expressionist. Teacher criticism of this work was its lack of an image. This made me start reflecting, had I gone too far by maximizing the painterliness at the expense of the image? For the rest of the year this problem became critical as I began to weave in and out of "the image" - ranging from the lack of an image to total emphasis on the image (see the Eureka paintings) then back to a position where I tried to arrive at a balance between the image and abstraction.

22-29 March 1985

To make paintings relating to the six Australian battle themes I needed to explore frontier violence. Questions I posed at the time included:

What are the images of frontier violence?

What are the landscapes?

How can these themes be presented in the most powerful way possible?

How does one proceed?

I started reading articles about the Battle of the Kalkadoons in North Queensland. The images that came across strongly to me were

- . Aboriginal warrior hurling an anthill down a mountain on to the enemy
- . spearing of a Native policeman

22-29 March 1985 (Contd.)

. the Native police on horseback - the climb being too difficult for the horses

. the fallen - the dead from the battle.

I collected archival images of the Kalkadoon Battle - mainly pictures of the hated Native police in their uniforms and with their rifles. I attempted a 6'x4' painting based on a photograph of a group of Native police. However, it wouldn't work so I painted it out.

1-6 April 1985

I started a series of drawings. I got my old scarecrow (the dominant image in my works of 1983) and dressed it in clothes suggestive of a Native policeman. I put it in various positions and made observational drawings. One of these drawings evolved into a painting on paper. It began as a charcoal sketch, then became a pastel drawing. From here on it went through a stage of acrylics, oil sticks and a reworking with acrylic again. Every technical rule was broken as I began searching for the right image, eliminating the unnecessary detail and then reducing the image to its essence. The statement became plain, simple and direct. It was a picture of the upper torso of a Native Policeman that had been speared. As this week continued further drawings were made including a detailed observational study of the sculpture of the Anzac horses and their cavalrymen found on Anzac Avenue in Campbell, near the War Memorial.

7-14 April 1985

Trip to Brisbane. Apart from visiting the Queensland Art Gallery, and some commercial galleries my experiences that week, with tales of the horrifying political situation and oppressive nature of



7-14 April 1985 (Contd.)

the Queensland government, "fired" me up to paint. I returned to Canberra very motivated and charged up ready to make some Queensland politico-historical works.



\* BATTLE OF BATTLE MOUNTAIN -  
DEATH OF A "NATIVE" POLICEMAN " OIL ON CANVAS

15-19 April 1985

Commenced painting the 6'x4' canvas of the spearing of the Native Policeman. The work took a few days and underwent a series of transformations involving gross amounts of heavy, leaden and tortured paint. The painting was a search and a struggle but it became one of the most important of my works in 1985.

22-26 April 1985

In the previous week I started making a series of small, acrylic experimental works on paper. For the imagery I got ideas from some of the busy, abstract markings found in the major painting of last week. I then started making small oil paintings. There was a colour shift away from blues, reds and greys to primary colours. The shapes became stylized and the colour areas broad. This was quite a departure from the works I had made over the past couple of years.



" BATTLE OF BATTLE MOUNTAIN - THE  
FALLEN "

OIL ON CANVAS

29 April-3 May 1985, Semester Break

Made a 5'x6' painting of the Kalkadoon Battle. It was based on one of the smaller works. The images contain figures lying dead on a hillside amidst an array of spears. The colours were an intense red and hard green with areas of harsh yellow. I felt



29 April-3 May 1985 (Contd.)

it had a feeling of vitality and freshness about it. Deliberately, I decided not to work it too far - and to leave a lot of the unfinished qualities in it.

5-19 May 1985

Commenced reading about the Eureka Stockade and isolating the images.

Made 3.5'x5' painting of horizontal figures - the dead lying on the ground. The shapes were quite definite, even simplified, and painted with vibrant colours - reds, greens and very dark areas. This painting contrasts with the "Native Policeman" painting because it relies more on form and colour rather than the busy, textured and painterly surface.



" BATTLE OF BATTLE MOUNTAIN -  
KALKADOON WARRIOR "

OIL ON CANVAS

5-19 May 1985 (Contd.)

Started planning for another Kalkadoon painting - exploring the idea of a central male figure. This image presented its problems. It is a static composition - a central image with a lot of space around it. My problem was how to make a lively painting out of the static composition.

This painting was probably resolved at one point. However, it attracted a lot of comment from students and teachers alike. I kept on working it - making patched-up jobs as various people made their comments. Eventually the painting failed disastrously. It was a brilliant example of how a painter should not give in to the comments of others, and of how such comments can totally throw one off balance. Eventually I destroyed the painting by scraping all the paint off.

20-24 May 1985

Started working on a series of small paintings that related to the Eureka Stockade. These were done quickly as I attempted to isolate images and explore possible approaches.

27-31 May 1985

Used this week to critically examine where I was at, to document and to photograph works to date. At the end of the week I held a mini-exhibition in the Photo Media area and got plenty of critical feedback from teachers.

3-7 June 1985

Travelled to Sydney to see the British show. I was impressed with the work of Kossoff, Auerbach, Christopher Le Brun and John



3-7 June 1985 (Contd.)

Walker. Also, I saw Mike Parr's exhibition of large drawings which were full of amazing energy and electrifying qualities.

Long Weekend, 8-9-10 June 1985

Trip to Wallaga Lake Aboriginal community. Documented in photographs aspects of family life.

11-14 June 1985

Made small oil study of Eureka Stockade using quite literal imagery, and planned a large painting 7'x5.5' of the Eureka Stockade.



" BATTLE OF THE EUREKA STOCKADE " OIL ON CANVAS

15-19 June 1985

Made the large Eureka painting. Here the image had become obvious. Also there was a change in technique. The image was painted quickly and with quite a lot of thick paint, until it emerged as a realistic and even smooth surfaced painting. The painting worried me a lot. After a couple of days using a large paint scraper I ruthlessly commenced scraping the painting back. Instead of putting the scraped paint on to the palette I left it in piles on the canvas. With firm, gestural strokes I kept scraping back and reworking areas with fresh paint all

15-19 June 1985 (Contd.)

over the whole canvas. The painting came alive and started to work as a whole with some incredibly textured surfaces. Following on from this painting I made another using the same approach - this time using the stockade itself as the dominant imagery. However, the process became laboured and the resultant image took on a more rustic landscapeful rather than the desired political intent. Eventually, months later, I destroyed this work by painting a new painting on top.

20 June-31 July, Semester Break

Spent three weeks travelling to Darwin, Northeast Arnhem Land (Yirrkala and Elcho Is.), Cairns and Mt Isa.

In Mt Isa I travelled with Al Grassby and two Aboriginal people to the site of Battle Mountain where the Kalkadoon "last stand" took place. All of this I documented in photographs. The battle site lay in a remote area between Mt Isa and Cloncurry.

24 July-4 August 1985

Completed work on the 1st canvas. The plan was to make a 1.5' x 1.5' painting of the 1930s flag. The canvas was bought and stretched and then primed, as the National product was not available until about a week later. For this I used red, yellow, blue, green, black and white. I then drew the image of the white cross and stars. The whole flag was then painted with acrylic paint. When dry I covered the canvas with oil paint. This oil paint was then scraped back and another



"BATTLE OF THE EUREKA STOCKADE  
- THE SOUTHERN CROSS "

OIL, ACRYLIC  
+ COLLAGE ON  
CANVAS

29 July-4 August 1985

Recommenced work at the Art School. My plan was to make a 7.5'x5' painting of the Eureka flag. The procedure involved was elaborate and time-consuming, so the finished product was not achieved until about a week later. For this I cut out shapes of blue material and stuck these to the canvas. Once all the cloth was pasted on to the canvas I drew in the image of the white cross and stars. The whole flag was then painted with acrylic paint. When dry I reworked the canvas with oil paint. This oil paint was then scraped back and another



29 July-4 August 1985 (Contd.)

fresh layer of thick oil paint applied. This stage was painted quickly and aggressively. After allowing the paint to settle for about a day I again scraped the layer back, created textured piles, reworked the paint with fresh pigment, built in new colours, and created smooth areas to contrast the texture.

5-17 August 1985

I continued with the Eureka flag idea for the next painting - this time a 5'x4' work. The concept was the torn, the broken image of the flag. My technical procedure was the same as the previous painting except with this one, I would actually burn cloth to create the feeling of the Southern Cross baptised with blood and fire.

Reflecting on the paintings made just prior to the semester break and the two flags made after the break, what had happened was that the image dominated. My concern was still painterliness but the technical qualities had become quite formal and mechanical - almost craft-like - the performing of certain technical procedures in order to reach an outcome. My whole approach had become rational; there was no freedom for the unintended or magical elements to creep through. This started to worry me, as the approach was quite the opposite to the way I liked to paint.

19 August-10 September 1985

This period I regard as my "red coat" soldier phase. Again I had a preconceived idea as to the outcome of the painting, although in its earlier stages I was doing a lot of searching

19 August-10 September 1985 (Contd.)

around. For the next few weeks I became bogged down with my "red coat". My concern became the technical qualities of the painting. I was trying to make some incredibly textured, rich and beautiful surfaces, but I was having problems with the image of the soldier. Conceptually I got locked into an almost realist mode, and got pushed into a corner of trying to make the soldier do what I wanted drawing-wise. The more I became obsessed with the drawing problems the worse the painting became. By 10 September I had become totally frustrated and demoralised over this painting. It was time to reassess and to critically rethink what it was I was doing.

11 September-11 October 1985

I had done some quick drawings from the art school model. I also hired my own model for a couple of reasons. It was becoming very obvious that the figure was becoming the central image of my work so it was important to get back to life drawing. Using the various drawings as my starting point I made some small paintings on the theme of Vinegar Hill. These were exploratory. I started planning a large canvas - 7'x5.5' - using a convict figure and the white flag of truce as the image. I collaged the surface with assorted coloured cloth, painted this with acrylic, and finally painted the work in oil (having gone through several oil phases before I decided to stop). At the same time, I started this same process on another large canvas - collaging another red coat.

By this point in time I was becoming quite depressed about my lack of output - the problem of becoming too bogged down

11 September-11 October 1985 (Contd.)

with certain works. I kept feeling the need to loosen up and get back to enjoying painting, instead of making it an academic and rational exercise. I changed tack, painting a medium-sized Vinegar Hill work - fast, vigorously and a break away from the type of work I had been doing.



" VINEGAR HILL "

OIL ON CANVAS

12 October 1985

Made two paintings - trying to get back to a bouncier and abstract expressionist approach. I decided to be bold and vigorous and to forget about all the academic concerns.



14-17 October 1985

Travelled to Perth. Visited the Battle site of Pinjarra  
86km. south of Perth. I once again documented this visit by  
taking colour slides.



"BATTLE OF PARRAMATTA - PEMULWUY" OIL ON CANVAS

23 October-4 December 1985

This six week period represented a return to all my earlier  
views on how I like to make my paintings. It was a time when  
I decided to stop dwelling on the image and to go back to a  
more abstract expressionist style. I had arrived at a stage

23 October-4December 1985 (Contd.)

when my subject matter had started to internalise. I ceased bothering to rationalise to any great extent what it was I was doing. My approach was to let the paint speak for itself, to lose one's self in the paint, and to let each painting determine its own course. I started painting vigorously and boldly, quickly, and with a lot of energy. Over this time I produced a lot of paintings.

6 December 1985

Travelled to Sydney to see the Vinegar Hill Battle site near Castle Hill.



"BATTLE OF BATHURST - DECOYS" OIL ON CANVAS



20 December-6 January 1986

Not much work was made over this time - but the three large paintings that I did make continued in the same vein as the above. There was a colour change, however, a move away from the reds and other strong colours, to a limited colour range of orange, reds, whites, blacks and greys.



" VINEGAR HILL "

OIL ON CANVAS

7 January 1986-mid February 1986

Continued with some painting. I had reached that phase of becoming comfortable with my style and at last knowing what it was I was doing. It was a time of critically assessing the year's work and making a few more paintings in the style that I felt happy with.